

Tobacco Retail Licensing And Its Impact on Youth Tobacco Use



According to the 2010 California Student Tobacco Survey, 10.8% of Placer County youth reported smoking tobacco products and an additional 6.7% reported using smokeless tobacco products. While these percentages may not seem exceptionally high, any amount of underage tobacco use is concerning, especially when about 64% of current California smokers started smoking before the age of 18. The younger a person is when they start to smoke, the harder it is for them to quit, and for that reason alone, it is increasingly important to reduce youth access to tobacco products.

One may ask where these youth obtain tobacco products, and not surprisingly, 67% of teens who smoke reported it was easy for them to buy cigarettes. While there are statewide laws prohibiting the sale of tobacco products to youth, these are often difficult to enforce and require close monitoring by local governments. Additionally, current penalties for tobacco sales to minors are not as stringent as they could be. This is where tobacco retail licensing becomes important. Tobacco retailer licensing is one way for communities to reduce youth access to tobacco, to ensure compliance with other tobacco related-laws, and to limit the negative public health effects associated with tobacco use.



Under a local tobacco retailer licensing law, the government requires all businesses that sell tobacco products to obtain a license from the government in exchange for the privilege of selling tobacco products to consumers. Many communities have adopted strong local tobacco retailer licensing ordinances that include licensing fees high enough to fund enforcement programs and strong penalties in the case of violations. Some have also adopted other policies that can be “plugged-in” to the basic licensing ordinance to provide greater health protections for youth. These policy options include prohibiting the sale of tobacco products near schools, creating license penalties for the sale of drug paraphernalia, and restricting the individual sale of little cigars and cigarillos.

While many tobacco retailers are cognizant of their tobacco sales and pay close attention to the age of their customers, implementing tobacco retail licensing policies places a greater sense of accountability among all retailers.

These policies are so important as they can truly limit the total number of retailers in the community, thus limiting the amount of tobacco products on the market, and ultimately limiting the overall amount of tobacco products used by the local population.

